

RHYTHM IN INDIAN SONGS AID TO INDIAN MAGIC

How the strange rhythms of Indian music played a most important part in old Indian ceremonies and in treatment of the sick by medicine men is explained by Miss Frances Densmore, collaborator of the Bureau of American Ethnology.

In a paper presented to the twentieth International Congress of Americanists, which has just been received in this country, she points out the importance of rhythm in Indian music. The Indians learned many of their songs in dreams. The Indian put himself in a mental and physical state somewhat akin to self-hypnotism. He believed that this "dream" state would bring him supernatural experiences, and that songs were given in such dreams by supernatural entities commonly called "Spirits".

"In the dream, this supernatural entity promised the Indian aid in time of need," says Miss Densmore. "And this assistance was to be obtained by singing the song and performing certain acts. Thus, in the opinion of the Indian, a spirit communicated with him in a manner which was rhythmic, and he had the power to reestablish the communication and draw upon a source of supernatural power by repeating this rhythm in the form of his 'personal song'."

If the song was one for healing a disease, the Indian could use it to treat the sick. If a patient did not recover, it was supposed either that the diagnosis of the case was incorrect, or else the patient was suffering from more than one disease. In the latter event, the second disease must be determined, and then a singer must be summoned who knew the proper songs for its cure. In all of this musical therapy the songs, with their strongly rhythmic quality, were regarded as vital in working the cure.

"The Indian did not consciously attribute the power to rhythm," says Miss Densmore. "He did not reason things out to that extent. He was, however, confident that the suggestion did the work, and from our study and general knowledge it appears probable that the rhythm was the principal power. The Indian singer knew it by a sort of primitive intuition, but could not explain it.

"The importance of rhythm is shown by the fact that an Indian singer remembers the rhythm of a song more accurately than the melody, often repeating the rhythm with exactness, when changing the melodic progressions."

After transcription and analysis of more than 1350 Indian songs, representing music of thirteen tribes, this expert on Indian music concludes that peculiarity of rhythm is the chief racial characteristic of Indian music, and in the mind of the Indian it is closely associated with supernatural or mysterious power.

This intellectual use of rhythm by the Indian medicine men is quite different from the emotional use of rhythm by negroes, she points out, the negro rhythm being used for self-expression.